

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 14, 2024 – ASH WEDNESDAY – YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*The Greatest Love of All*” *

Joel 2:1–2,12–17 (God calls for a solemn assembly)
Psalm 103:8–14 (Praise God for His mercy)
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10 (Now is the time to accept God’s salvation)
St. Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21 (Jesus teaches proper piety)

Some of you may remember when you were in elementary school and had to give one of those flimsy little mass-produced valentines to every kid in the class—even to kids you didn’t like or care about. And you were supposed to get lots of valentines back from those same children, most of which were equally insincere.

Or possibly, you were a nerdy kid like me, who hardly got any valentines from anyone, except for a flowery, lacy, mushy one from Grandma. And, whenever the Necco candy hearts were passed around, I always seemed to get the ones with the dumbest sayings. Cultural customs like these can make a person feel both unpopular and unloved. And so, this Ash Wednesday—which is also Valentine’s Day—provides us an excellent opportunity to think about a love far greater than any *person* can have or show: The unconditional, unlimited love of God for each of us.

Ephesians 1:4 tells us: “Even before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his through our union with Christ.” *Imagine!* Before God created the universe, or you were ever born, God wanted you for His very own.

And then, John 3:16 tells us: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Out of the amazing love God had for each and every one of us before the world began, He then *came into* our world to become one of us in Jesus Christ, and to die for our sins, so that we might be with Him through all eternity.

What else does the Bible tell us about God’s love? We read in Romans 8:31-38 (NIV), “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? ... No one.

Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Wow! Even if no other human being on earth loves you, you were loved from before all time, and will be loved throughout eternity, by the God who created you, His Son who gave His life for you, and His Holy Spirit who lives in the hearts of every believer to guide and to comfort us. Each of us is God’s Valentine, now and always.

And so, the question becomes, how are we to respond to the wondrous love of God? There are many ways to show how much we love the Lord, but the best guideline is what Jesus taught us in Mark 12:30-31: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ [and] ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” And we will find that these three loves—for God, self, and neighbor—can be tied to our Lenten devotional practices.

In tonight’s Gospel reading, Jesus calls His followers to three traditional Old Testament spiritual disciplines—prayer, fasting, and charitable giving. Since the early days of Christendom, the Church adopted these as the disciplines to be observed during Lent. And so, let us look at them as responses to God’s love:

Prayer involves spending time with, talking to, and listening to, the God who loves us and whom we love in return. It is through prayer that we draw closer to God, and are able to discern His will for our lives.

Fasting has to do with loving ourselves enough to engage in self-denial, in order to deepen our relationship with God and strengthen our faith. The more we empty ourselves of selfishness, the more room there is in us for God and His love.

Charitable giving shows love toward our neighbors by purposefully increasing our generosity toward those in need. And in doing so, we are brought into a more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ—the One who became poor for our sakes by coming among us in poverty as a Servant.

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus spent forty days in the desert, praying, fasting, and meditating on the Scripture He knew and loved. As He did, He grew stronger in His faith, in His connection to the Holy Spirit, and His ability to withstand the Adversary, the devil. By His example, Jesus shows us that a sustained time of focused repentance, devotion to God, and the practice of spiritual disciplines is good for our souls, and necessary for our growth in faith.

When we endeavor to pray, fast, and give, we tend to think mostly about what we will give up during Lent. Some Christians pledge to give up sweets, meat, alcohol, or smoking. Indeed, such sacrifices may be beneficial to our health. But are they acceptable to God?

Repeatedly, throughout Scripture, we see that God is not interested in “religious” gestures like fasting from food, dressing symbolically in garments of mourning, or wearing ashes on one’s head in public penance—that is, unless these actions are accompanied by the conversion of our hearts, and tangible changes in our lives. Psalm 51 tells us “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit”—that is, a heart willing to submit to the Lord in all things and do God’s will, not our own, or the world’s.

So, rather than sacrificing chocolate or potato chips, I’d like to suggest that we both give up that which distances us from Christ, and give that which will re-connect us to Him. Think about it—what if, this Lent, you gave up:

- *Complaining*, and instead, gave thanks in all things? (Eph. 5:20);
- *Putting others down*, and instead, encouraged everyone? (Jn. 15:12);
- *Watching TV or surfing the Internet*, and instead, devoted yourself to prayer (Col. 4:2);
- *Being anxious and worrying*, and instead, gave all your fears over to God? (1 Pet. 5:7);
- *Spending money only on yourself*, and instead, donated to a local ministry or food bank. (Isa. 58:3-10).

It’s a scientific fact that nature abhors a vacuum. Something will always fill it. So, during Lent, if we are committed to sacrificing ourselves, our hearts, our time, our energy, and our money, turning these from their usual focus and direction, toward the Lord’s priorities, God *can* and *will* fill that space in us with more and more of His love.

On this Valentine’s Day / Ash Wednesday, I pray that you will leave church assured of God’s eternal love for you, and that He will give you the grace to respond to His love by strengthening you for prayer, fasting, and giving generously to others.

In Jesus’ Name, *Amen*.

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 14 February 2018, St. John’s Episcopal Church, Compass PA. Used with permission.